

Dec 25, 2022

Jn 1:1-14

As an amateur astronomer, allow me to report: this past Wednesday was the longest night of the year.

Some of us took note of it, some didn't. But in another time, in apostolic times, everyone noticed. As winter came on, and the days grew shorter, many people were filled with fear that the sun was just going away, never to return. Imagine living in that world. Imagine we are sitting in a very dark place—maybe the inside of a house (most only had one room), maybe a field on a starless night. And imagine we are shoulder to shoulder, gathered in a circle instead of spread out among our homes. We willingly, almost desperately huddle together, not so that we feel squeezed or trapped; but so that we are warm and so that we know we are not alone.

Now, imagine that we are gathered together around a light. A candle. A torch. A lamp...Something which allows us to see one another's faces, as well as the light itself. Something that brings warmth, in our hands or in our hearts.

That is the truth. This is where we are. In this place. Around a great light. Hear it again:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Word, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. ~John 1:1-4

Welcome to the Gospel, according to St. John, 'The beloved disciple'. All four gospels give us stories about the origins of Jesus. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus shows up fully-grown, ready to go, ready to be commissioned to action by being baptized in the Jordan River. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we hear stories of angels and shepherds and Jesus' birth, the coming of God as a tiny, vulnerable baby.

John, though, goes back even further in time, back to the very beginning, not just of Jesus, but of the Universe. It's no coincidence that this passage sounds so like the opening verses of Genesis—*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light* [Genesis 1:1-3]. John wants us to make this connection. He deliberately sets out to arouse our memory of this story.

This story of Jesus is not just the story of a man. This story of Jesus is not just the story of a baby. This story of Jesus is the story of God: of God's mighty acts of creation. In and through the coming of Jesus, God is creating again, something new, a new reality. The story of Jesus is a story as basic as darkness and light. It is as cosmic as the turning of the planet, away from the sun, and then back again.

Imagine it again with me, the darkness. But this time... there is no light. There are no shoulders to lean against. It is just you, alone.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:3b-

5)

Now, before we go on, let's think a bit about darkness: It is a simple biological fact that we need certain kinds of darkness. In the darkness, under the barren soil, seeds germinate. In the darkness after the working lights have been turned off for the night, workers take their rest. In the darkness of the night, loving words and gestures are exchanged between people. Darkness can be a powerful and beautiful thing. I wear around my wrist, an electronic scold. It gives me a daily reminder that we 21st century Americans are among the most sleep-deprived people in the world, because we continue to bathe our eyes to the light of computer screens and smartphones instead of enjoying the comfort and blessing of darkness and a good night's sleep. Under these light polluted skies, most Americans seldom if ever even see the Milky Way and the wonders of the stars in their courses. Darkness can be good, in and of itself.

But we also need the light. The seed that has been germinating in the dark needs the sun so that the chlorophyll in its leaves can absorb and transform its energy,

for its continued growth above ground. Every human being needs sunlight to boost our vitamin D, so that we can absorb our calcium, and have strong muscles and good immune systems. Even people need the clear light of day to shine on their relationships and help them to live and love in the real world of jobs, family obligations, budgets, and good citizenship.

A recurring cycle of light and dark has been alternating since the beginning of time, and light is essential. In Jesus, a kind of light came into our world that can never be fully extinguished: the light of God's love. The Advent of Jesus is a powerful reminder that we are not, in fact, alone, but instead, that we are known and cherished, loved and cared for.

The light is God's message to us, God's way of speaking to us on a cellular level, a level before language. But recall too: the human species is known as *homo sapiens*, Latin for "wise man." And so we deal in, and John speaks about, not just our instinctive responses to things like light and dark, but also in words, thoughts, concepts.

December 21 was the longest night of the year. The winter solstice took place: the sun, at midday, was at its lowest point above the horizon. That day was our shortest day, and that night was our longest night.

Many churches hold services on or around the longest night, to offer a place of sanctuary for those who, in this season that so emphasizes joy and merry-making, find themselves nevertheless in a spiritual darkness because of grief or loss.

That Wednesday was the longest night of the year. This, however, is the day when the ancient world let out its breath, in a collective sigh of recognition and relief that the light was returning, the light was coming once again. In that ancient world, as the solstice passed and the days began to grow longer again, the people held festivals and celebrations to mark the return of the sun. The Roman Festival took place today, on December 25. They called it *Sol Invictus*, the Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun (S-U-N).

We Jesus-followers have spent all Advent waiting for the light, pushing back against the darkness by lighting one more candle each week. As the physical world (or even maybe our own internal world) grew darker, still we have been insisting- here comes the Light, the Unvanquished Son of God, the Light of the World. God's Great Communication that we are seen, we are loved. He is coming. And now, we know- He is here. Thanks be to God. Amen